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OUR VIEW

Valuable cargo

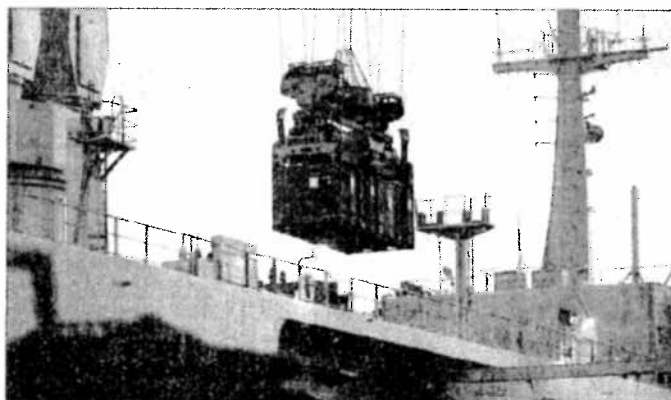
State ports | It's in N.C.'s best interest to ensure facilities remain competitive

Those enormous blue cranes that jut high into the Wilmington skyline are imposing, all right, but it is difficult nevertheless to imagine that the port they serve, along with its sister facility in Morehead City, contributed \$7.5 billion to North Carolina's economy in 2009.

That's the conclusion of a recent study, and lest there be any confusion it does not purport to say that North Carolina would lose the jobs and business tied to the ports if they closed tomorrow. Rather, the value of the study, conducted by researchers tied to N.C. State University and other public universities, is that it underscores the importance of a busy, viable port to North Carolina's economy.

Some people, particularly those who fought the effort to build a new international terminal near Southport, may be skeptical of the report's findings, given that it was commissioned by the State Ports Authority.

But shipping always has been an important industry. The two ports move more than 3 million tons of cargo annually and, either directly or indirectly, are tied to more than 65,000 jobs, as well as millions of dollars in state and local



Cargo is loaded onto a Navy ship at the Port of Wilmington. The state's two ports move more than 3 million tons of cargo annually. *StarNews file photo*

tax revenues. They bring goods to our region and handle exports as well as considerable military traffic.

It is in the best interest of the state and its residents to ensure that these two ports continue to remain competitive. That will be more difficult as ships continue to grow ever larger – too large to navigate the 42-foot-deep Cape Fear River channel.

The push to build a new port at Southport is, for all practical purposes, dead. Little expansion space remains at either port, and the long trip up the channel to the Port of Wilmington is not as convenient as docking at ports in Charleston, Savannah or Norfolk, which are larger and closer to the ocean.

Like the remainder of the U.S.

economy, the ports were hurt by the recession.

Yet despite their obvious handicaps, the state's two ports have remained. The N.C. State Ports Authority and other local and state leaders are charged with ensuring that the ports at Wilmington and Morehead City continue to be an important component of our state's economy.

Their contribution isn't just about the longshoremen who unload the ships, or the industries they supply with raw materials or finished products. They are part of an intertwined commerce network that allows North Carolina to enjoy a diverse and successful economy.

In short, those massive cranes lift more than mere cargo.